From My Perspective . . .

Peer Collaboration in Graduate School and Beyond

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One of the best pieces of advice I can offer college students, particularly those desiring to pursue a career in academics, is to foster relationships with those who complement you. While in graduate school, I was fortunate enough to establish a working relationship and rewarding friendship with a fellow student in my cohort. I had just finished my master’s degree and was in the first year of the doctoral program in criminology at the University of South Florida. Throughout college, up to that point, I was the introverted, loner type. I avoided study groups and involvement with my peers. My grades were consistently high, and I felt this validated my decision to remain independent from my graduate cohort. But that changed when my advisors suggested that I collaborate with a fellow student as I progressed through the doctoral program.

Perhaps suggest is an understatement. As a graduate student, it is generally a very good idea to follow the advice of your graduate advisors and mentors. Their advice is based on experience and knowledge that students tend to lack. Two of my mentors, who served as the cochairs on my master’s thesis, conspired to initiate a plan for my academic success, despite my resistance. One day, one of these professors asked me to meet her in her office to discuss my education. When we met, she advised me to team up with a classmate, Denise Paquette Boots, to study for the upcoming comprehensive exams (comps). I told my professor that I did not need assistance preparing for the comps and preferred to work alone, but she urged me to reconsider. My other mentor also supported the idea, so with some resistance, I agreed to study for my comps with Denise. I assumed I would just be able to offer lip service and eventually they would forget about forcing me to work with a peer, after which I would be free to continue my education independently—as I always had.

My mentors did not forget. Unexpectedly, they proved to be a united front on this issue. They advised me to schedule regular meetings with one of them and Denise to prepare for the comps. Such meetings are typical for doctoral students preparing to take major exams. Over the next couple of years, we met to discuss criminological theories, research, and scientific methodology. Denise and I also met outside of the department to pull research literature and discuss what we were reading. As you might anticipate, we became good friends as well as academic colleagues. We discussed research ideas and conducted our own research—in addition to what we were working on for departmental projects and our dissertations. Reflecting back, I acknowledge that our meetings helped me to successfully complete the comprehensive exams and better prepared me for academe.

After the comprehensive exams, I asked my mentors why they insisted on matching Denise and me as study partners. They indicated that we complemented each other. Since both of us had completed the master’s program together, our professors knew our strengths and weaknesses. They also saw potential in the two of us and were grooming us for a future in teaching and research. They had hatched a plan to improve our chances of success not just in graduate school, but also in the field. Collaboration with peers is beneficial, and it is very common in academe. Graduate school is intense and rigorous. It helps to have a colleague or friend who can relate to your situation and offer constructive support when you are faced with challenges, such as dealing with a difficult course or even a problem in your life outside of the academic realm. After graduate school, social networks and collaboration become especially valuable. While it is important to demonstrate that you are capable of independent work, the quality of work can substantially improve with collaboration. Each of us has our own unique experiences, life events, and learning styles that contribute to developing ideas and strengthening a study. Often, collaborations with others can lead to the production of works that are more comprehensive and richer in quality than they would have been without it.

When engaging in collaboration, it is important to work with peers who complement your abilities. Ideally, I would recommend that you work with fellow students who are stronger than you in one area (e.g., statistics) while you are stronger in another (e.g., abstract theory). This way you both bring something greater to the relationship. I have found it is best to work with someone who possesses the same abilities and qualities (e.g., intellect, values, research agenda, etc.). If the differential is too great between two people, it may place too much pressure on the relationship for it to survive in the long term. I have been very fortunate to find an academic counterpart who complements my work scholastically. Together, Denise and I have continued to collaborate and publish studies testing social learning mechanisms among domestic batterers, using data that we collected in graduate school, and studies examining the influence of mental health problems on delinquency among youth, using the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN) data. I have been especially fortunate that this relationship has resulted in an endearing friendship that I deeply cherish. I am forever grateful to my mentors for urging me to forge this relationship during graduate school. I hope that you will also experience how rewarding and enriching collaboration can be.

**Dr. Jennifer** Wareham is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. In addition to her scholarship, she teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in criminological theory and research methods, and finds it rewarding to see students initially struggling with research succeed in that course. She enjoys cooking, reading and watching science fiction, and spending time with her daughter, whom she named after a Star Trek TV series character.

**Dr. Wareham’s** good friend and colleague, Dr. Denise Paquette Boots, is a criminologist and associate professor at the University of Texas at Dallas who studies developmental perspectives of mental health and violence.